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A Note Card and a Soapbox:

Agendas, Advocacy, and Extemporaneous Speaking

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Abstract

This paper discusses the potential for advocacy in collegiate extemporaneous speaking. It argues that given the inherently civic nature of the event, extemporaneous speaking ought to address higher causes that transcend competitive restraints. Unfortunately, the potential of the event is generally hindered by stylistic trends and other competitive norms. These barriers are discussed as well ad suggestions for a paradigm shift that will hopefully speak to the future course of the activity as a whole.

A Note Card and a Soapbox:

Agendas, Advocacy, and Extemporaneous Speaking

Participants in extemporaneous speaking, or "extempers" are often seen as a sub-culture in the world of forensics. They are both savvy observers of the world and the reason most teams arrive at tournaments half an hour early. Furthermore, extempers have the "burden" of participating in one of forensics' most ambiguous events. While other individual events (with the exceptions of After Dinner Speaking and Impromptu Speaking) are accompanied with relatively cut-and-dry descriptions and rules, the American Forensics Association (AFA) and National Forensics Association (NFA) offer the following descriptions for extemporaneous speaking, respectively:

- Contestants will be given three topics in the general area of current events, choose one, and have 30 minutes to prepare a speech that is the original work of the student. Maximum time limit for the speech is 7 minutes. Limited notes are permitted. Students will speak in listed order. Posting of topics will be staggered ("Event descriptions," americanforensics.org).
- For each round, contestants will select one of three topics on current national and international events. The contestant will have thirty minutes to prepare a five to seven minute speech on the topic selected. Notes are permissible but should be at a minimum. Maximum 7 minutes ("Events rules," nationalforensics.org).

The emphasis of these criterions is the *mechanics* of the event and the *nature* of topics rather than the *purpose* of the delivered speeches. While they do control for topics, the rules do not indicate whether extemporaneous speaking is a persuasive, informative, or other form of public speaking event. Rather, that decision is left to the

competitors, their coaches, and, perhaps ultimately, to the judges.

While the ambiguity of extemporaneous speaking may foster creativity on the part of speakers; any observer of trends in forensics, and specifically individual events, will acknowledge that participants' creativity is often stifled by trends that tend to compromise substance in favor of stylistically popular choices. As an event that addresses vital domestic and international issues, extemporaneous speaking has all the makings of a speech event built on persuasion and advocacy, which is also consistent with the foundational and philosophical doctrines of the major forensics organizations ("Our credo," n.d.). Unfortunately, the event has instead headed down a much more shallow path where competitors opt to showcase their knowledge of obscure facts and potentially biased and flawed foreign news sources, rather than constructing speeches intended to make an impact. Extempers have become very good at "dumbing-down" current events, but often fail at making them matter.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the persuasive potential of extemporaneous speaking, as well as the conventional barriers that have prevented its realization. This analysis will be achieved through the lens of past research on similar issues and upon personal narrative evidence. I will first discuss common trends in extemporaneous speaking, then outline the argument for a civically engaged extemp paradigm, and finally outline recommendations.

Trends in Extemp and Other Barriers to Advocacy

Forensics research has long indicated that certain trends are adopted in the activity toward the end of competitive success, often to the detriment of pedagogy (Hamm, 1993; Colvert, 1994). Public address topics often sacrifice substance for "flash", and

interpretation performances become cliché and formulaic. In understanding the impact and resilience of trends in forensics, it is first important to understand why competitors fall prey to these trends in the first place.

Competition has its theoretical roots in the realms of evolutionary biology and psychology (Hamm, 1993). However, for our purposes it is appropriate to discuss the social scientific factors unique to the academic and forensic communities that facilitate such a strong adherence to the notion of competition.

Hamm (1993) posits that "[competition] will continue to overshadow the educational goals that were originally set forth by the forefathers [*sic*] of speech and debate competition" (p. 13). According to Hamm, one factor that fosters this proliferation is that of competition between academic organizations. Constantly in search of prestige, higher enrollment, and more funding, colleges and universities are inclined to reward competitively successful forensics organizations with increased funding and visibility on campus. In short, forensic competition becomes a manifestation of institutional competition. In a constant effort to win the attention and financial support of their departments, forensics organizations tend to follow in suit.

Hamm (1993) also suggests that winning has become the philosophical driving force behind forensic involvement, stating that "the stakes for competing have risen dramatically, the educational aspects of the activity have fallen away and are replaced by a dedication to victory at all costs. How we win takes a back seat to what we win" (p. 14). While competition has its pedagogical benefits (Kirch & Zeidler, 1999), it can also be problematic, generating confusion about objectives and values, and limiting the stylistic choices that competitors can make (Hamm, 1993). Rather, in the interest of

being competitively successful, participants adopt the most popular and "safe" trends in any given event.

Extemporaneous speaking is no exception. A number of trends have pushed the event into a realm that is dominated by the "showing-off" of obscure, but not necessarily useful sources, and information about current events. One of the most recognizable barriers to advocacy in extemporaneous speaking is an emphasis on difficult and obscure sources. Colvert (1994) suggests that national publications like *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News & World Report* have become unacceptable in the eyes of most extemporaneous judges. Ballots are traditionally littered with slash marks counting sources, and comments indicating that "more is always better" (p. 6). Consequentially, competitors generally seek out difficult and obscure sources in order to construct a more impressive speech. Unfortunately, Colvert finds that not only do more sources not necessarily equal a better speech, but that such a heavy emphasis on sources can work to the detriment of the speech's educational and persuasive potential. According to Colvert, "Students catch on quickly that the more obscure sources receive more positive comments from judges. For many students this creates problems in argument formation and substantiation" (p. 9).

Colvert goes on to suggest that emphasis has moved away from the argument, and has instead been placed on how "flashy" the source is. Her concern is that not all speakers, audience members, or judges are equipped to adequately scrutinize obscure foreign source, and instead reward speakers for their use by sole virtue of their obscurity. Certain sources, such as the *Economist*, further stifle meaningful analysis by providing many speaker's with all the analysis that they need. Instead of incorporating their own

views into their speech, speakers will often let these often biased sources "write" the speech for them.

This rewarding of obscurity also stretches into the issue of topic selection. During the four years I competed in collegiate forensics, coaches consistently encouraged me to choose difficult and "safe" questions in extemp. Issues such as the environment, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, emotionally-charged questions about terrorism, and school violence were to be avoided in favor of questions about issues, places, and people that are less known by the judges and less volatile in the eyes of the average listener. The former issues are more likely to offend the judge, and their universality is often equated with simplicity. We've all heard about the environment and school violence. An illustration I often use is that, theoretically, a competitor would be better advised to choose a question about farming yields in Tanzania rather than a question about gun control, when the latter is undoubtedly more relevant to the immediate forensics audience of primarily American citizens.

What this equation boils down to is an adherence to formula and flash. Instead of constructing in depth and meaningful arguments, competitors generally offer either surface-level analysis or focus on presenting "impressive" rather than relevant information. Consequentially, extemp remains and event designed to allow participants to "show-off" rather than provide subjective insights and arguments about fundamentally controversial and relevant issues.

The Case for Persuasion

Current trends aside, the foundation of forensics as an activity is in persuasion and advocacy. The following is the credo of the American Forensics Association:

> Our principle is the power of individuals to participate with others in shaping their world through the human capacity of language; our commitment to argument expresses our faith in reason-giving as a key to that power; our commitment to advocacy expresses our faith in oral expression as a means to empower people in situations of their lives; our research studies the place of argument in advocacy in these situations of empowerment; our teaching seeks to expand students' appreciation for the place of argument and advocacy in shaping their worlds, and to prepare students through classrooms, forums, and competition for participation in their world through the power of expression; and our public involvement seeks to empower through argument and advocacy ("Our credo," americanforensics.org).

Indeed, this credo is thinking well beyond the boundaries of collegiate competition (though, admittedly, such competition only constitutes a part of the AFA's functions). Rather, the aim of the organization is to transcend academia and become actively involved in bettering communities and society at large.

This emphasis is not ill-advised. Rather, there is significant research on the pedagogical and practical value of advocacy, especially when it is developed in a way that goes further than mere competition and rather attempts to accomplish something more (Dean, 1992; Bellon, 2000; Gehrke, 1998).

In an analysis of competitive persuasive speaking, Dean (1992) argues that the extent to which the event is *persuasive* is rather limited. Dean posits that "contest persuasion exists in a vacuum and the concept of public is being ignored. While the skills forensics teaches us are certainly valuable, their direct applicability to parallel

contexts outside the tournament setting is more limited than the forensics community would like to admit" (p. 192). Dean contends that the role of the audience has been compromised in persuasion in favor of formulaic and "safe" approaches to content and structure.

What Dean (1992) fails to acknowledge, however, is that the audience is hardly free of fault. As I've noted earlier, judges, coaches, and fellow competitors are all guilty of succumbing to trends in the activity, whether it be persuasion or extemporaneous speaking. Consequentially, the audience removes itself from the picture somewhat voluntarily, making these trends the standards by which participants feel the need to live up to. This comes at the expense of a sensed need to provide meaningful persuasive appeal and perhaps change the minds of those watching the speech.

The value of truly engaged advocacy cannot be ignored. Educational research has consistently stressed the importance of student engagement in all facets of learning (Mann, 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999; Rogers & Renard, 1999). If given the opportunity to be truly expressive in any forensic event, providing persuasive messages that genuinely come from their own points of view, students will become more engaged in the event, and thus have a higher affect toward learning from it (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Competitors who do not become engaged and rather jump through the standard hoops of the event may be competitively successful, but will ultimately derive little fulfillment from extemporaneous speaking, instead taking an exclusively strategic approach to it (Mann, 2001).

Furthermore, we can return to the fundamentals of the activity. The basis of formalizing public speaking into a competitive event is persuasion ("Our credo," n.d.).

The American Forensics Association has even named its journal *Argumentation and Advocacy*. Undoubtedly, there is an inclination towards doing what we can to touch the world as a whole with forensics. However, the desire to make genuine connections with an audience has fallen by the wayside in favor of formulas and competitive goals.

Extemporaneous speaking, in particular, is an event that is begging to persuade. With the exception of persuasion, extemp is the only event that is built on the foundation of relevant and controversial current events. Rarely are the questions posed in extemp rounds not open to multiple interpretations and answers. What would be the point in asking such questions if the answers were cut-and-dry? As out-of-reach as many of these issues may seem to the average audience member or judge, they do matter. It then becomes the job of the speaker to make these issues matter and suggest a position that is genuinely rooted in their own point of view. This approach to extemporaneous speaking not only enhances the likelihood of optimal engagement, but also ensures that sources and facts will be constructively used to *supplement* arguments, rather than replace or make them. Ideally, an extemporaneous speaker driven by the genuine desire to change minds outside the vacuum of this activity will create a situation in which all the other formulas for competitive success will take care of themselves.

So Now What?

In writing this paper, I am reminded of one of the first tournaments of my final season of competition. It was slightly over a month after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, and the prep. room was alive with discussions regarding how and if questions regarding 9-11 should be addressed. Many competitors indicated an intention to avoid such questions at all costs, given their sensitive and potentially cliché nature.

Indeed, terrorism was an issue that was being "beaten to death" on the news, but was completely avoiding the issue in the domain of extemp advisable? This also came at the time when the Lincoln Douglas debate community was discussing whether to keep that year's resolution regarding terrorism, given that there were several calls to abandon the topic in favor of something else. After all, terrorism had become an emotionally charged issue that few would be inclined to argue, especially on the side of the negative. However, the topic ultimately stood, favoring arguments that the timely topic presented a rare opportunity for the activity to function outside of its own domain:

> I totally agree that it will be painful for many - hopefully all of us - but that's a good thing if it can help us all to accomplish one of the value goals of our activity that I think we can profit from attending to more: humanizing issues in order to make all of us more responsible citizens, more caring people, more emotionally sensitive rhetors. Ultimately, forensics should help us all to be more logical, better advocates, better thinkers - but it also needs to make us better PEOPLE [*sic*] if it wishes to demand our continued effort and allegiance. (Paine, 2001, archive.debateaddict.com)

In other words, debate, or forensics in general, does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it speaks of real issues that have real implications and applications. It should seem intuitive that the activity should do these issues justice.

However, change happens in increments, begging for an event-by-event approach to the problem at hand. As I stated before, extemporaneous speaking is a unique presence in forensics, in that it is fundamentally political. Even persuasive public speaking does not have this confining criteria, as there is no rule preventing a competitor

from delivering a ten minute speech encouraging the judge to go on a date with her/him. Extemp., on the other hand, requires speaking on "the general area of current events" ("Event descriptions," n.d., americanforensics.org). The approach that speakers take in tackling these events is another story, allowing for a significant degree of freedom.

At its best, extemp serves to break down intellectual barriers between the audience and relevant, albeit complex social and political issues. Furthermore, there is the implicit requirement, and traditional and scholarly requirement that arguments be made in extemporaneous speaking (Aden, 1992). Why not make *meaningful* arguments while we're at it? Extemp is an ideal opportunity for forensics to live up to its own ideology. We are wasting our time in many respects if we are not making some attempt to change the world for the better. Why not utilize seven minutes of full attention toward a greater, proactive end?

In order to allow extemporaneous speaking to realize a potential that transcends the monotony of factual regurgitation and instead aims to address a community larger than that of forensics; judges, coaches, and competitors ought to pursue a paradigm shift that will enable the event to bloom into something much larger than the activity. First, it is necessary to recover from the aversion our community has to opinion in extemporaneous speaking. Indeed, issues such as abortion, the death penalty, and religion are sensitive ones that are virtually impossible to tackle in the limited confines of forensics, but others are worth addressing from a genuinely subjective angle. One way to allow this is by rethinking the kinds of topics that are offered in extemp. While there is certainly value in being aware of economic conditions in countries such as Malaysia or Ivory Coast, there are certainly more immediate concerns worth addressing on both the

national and international stage. Removing the stigma generally attached to issues such as education reform, race relations, human rights, and the environment is a step that judges, coaches, and competitors can all take towards ensuring that extemp analysis can become more meaningful. And while one does not want to fully discount the value of the more obscure facets of the global community, competitors should at least be expected to give such issues some relevance that goes beyond the obligatory statement in the speech's attention getter.

A second step in the right direction would be to allow more creativity within this event. If speakers are allowed more self-determination in terms of the kinds of speeches they deliver, they are provided with a greater opportunity and incentive to think outside the competitive box and speak from their own sentiments. This end can be achieved in a number of ways. The most promising is to reevaluate our communities reliance on extemp *questions*. The rules of both NFA and AFA call for speakers to present on a *topic*, not necessarily a question ("Events rules," n.d.; "Event descriptions," n.d.). If tournament directors were to provide speakers with prompts such as names of countries and leaders, or philosophical frameworks, the competitor would be given a relative degree of free reign in constructing a topic that is indicative of their own opinions rather than those expressed in that week's *Economist*.

Third, reframing our emphasis on competition can help bring more persuasive content into extemporaneous speaking. While competitive goals do have pedagogical value (Zeidler & Kirch, 1999), it is best approached with a grain assault. One colleague of mine has compared forensic competition to professional wrestling. The core purpose is entertainment, but audiences still allow themselves to become somewhat involved in

the competition, but go home knowing that none of it is real. Likewise, forensics scholars, coaches, judges, and participants should certainly value competition, but ultimately return to the core value of the activity, education. Students are most likely to learn from forensics when they are thoroughly engaged, speaking on issues they care about and developing connections with their audience that are grounded in a shared desire to make the world a better place.

Finally, participants in and coaches and judges of extemporaneous speaking should open the door for some emotional appeal rather than the information-oriented style of extemporaneous speaking whose pathological appeal is generally limited to humor, Dean (1992) suggests that "Since human understanding is intuitive as well as cognitive, creating a bond of understanding between speaker and audience may involve emotional appeals" (p. 196). Extempers ought to be engaged in what they say and move away from the gimmicky "extemp humor" that has become so pervasive in the event. One of the best extemporaneous speeches I ever witnessed sacrificed a great deal of humor and even structure in favor of emotional appeal and managed to take first place at one of the most difficult tournaments of the season. This competitor spoke on the AIDS crisis in Africa and kept the use of humor to an appropriate minimum, grounding a fair share of his argumentation in the fact that it was fundamentally wrong that so many lives were ending as a result of neglect by the U.S. government and drug companies. Thus, he not only managed to bring an emotional element to the event, but also brought a seemingly distant foreign issue home, causing the audience to care about it in terms that went well beyond the confines of the self-centered political and economic interests of the U.S. Continuing to reward and coach these types of extemporaneous speeches can help

the event evolve into a very meaningful outlet for advocacy.

At this point, it should seem apparent that this paper is about more than the event of extemporaneous speaking. Rather, individual events as a whole have strayed away from their roots in advocacy and have become locked in an exclusive vacuum that does little to genuinely address the world at large. Extemp is simply one opportunity to generate change that can ultimately make this activity matter on a higher level. Countless convention papers, speeches, and list serve posts call for meaningful change in forensics, but participants do little more than nod their heads and move on. Perhaps a loosely defined event like extemp can work to truly turn heads and return this activity to a foundation that will allow it to realize its true potential and speak to a community much larger than the one from which it was derived.

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